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Review of: Koenraad Jonckheere, ed. Michiel Coxcie (1499–1592) and the Giants of His Age. Exh. Cat. Museum Leuven. Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2013

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Published in:
Renaissance Quarterly

DOI:
[10.1086/682454](https://doi.org/10.1086/682454)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

de Jong, J. (2015). Review of: Koenraad Jonckheere, ed. Michiel Coxcie (1499–1592) and the Giants of His Age. Exh. Cat. Museum Leuven. Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2013. *Renaissance Quarterly*, 68(2), 637-638. <https://doi.org/10.1086/682454>

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Michiel Coxcie (1499–1592) and the Giants of His Age. Koenraad Jonckheere, ed. Exh. Cat. Museum Leuven. Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2013. 208 pp. €75.

Even though the sizeable but largely lost oeuvre of Michiel Coxcie (1499–1592) is “too complex for this to be a comprehensive study,” Koenraad Jonckheere and six other scholars have made an attempt “to reveal the historical truth” (6), in a beautifully produced book that appeared as the catalogue of an exhibition at the M-Museum Leuven. During his long career, Coxcie was an internationally and highly respected artist, who counted the principal members of the Habsburg dynasty among his patrons. Yet twelve years after his death, Karel van Mander had little to report on him in his *Schilderboeck* and even criticized him for being “not copious in his composition” and “making use of Italian designs now and then.” This urged Jonckheere “to restore Michiel Coxcie to his rightful place at the fore front of art history” (6).

In eight chapters, Coxcie’s reputation and career are discussed, and his works, subdivided into the various media he was active in, reconstructed and studied. The image that emerges is that of a Netherlandish artist who was highly appraised for adopting the Italian Renaissance style and introducing it in the North, where the Habsburg monarchs gladly availed themselves of it to pose as successors to the rulers of classical antiquity. According to the authors, Coxcie’s work was also (or still) important in the 1560s, when a revitalized religious art was desired in the wake of the Council of Trent. Although Coxcie kept receiving respectable commissions until the end of his life, his work must by then have seemed outdated. A few years before his death he received financial support from Philip II, after an emotional complaint that he was in a pitiful state. Overseeing his career and assessing his importance, Jonckheere concludes that “Coxcie can be regarded as Rubens’s forerunner in the Low Countries in several respects” (45).

The authors have succeeded in giving Coxcie the attention he deserves within a historical context, but Jonckheere in particular may have been overzealous in his attempt to rebut Van Mander’s critical remark and restore Michiel Coxcie “to his rightful place.” In his discussion of the *Paradise* paintings in Vienna, Jonckheere eagerly discovers

borrowings from classical sculptures and the work of Michelangelo, where I do not see any specific similarities and only notice that the presumed example and Coxcie's figure both raise their arm to pick a fruit or hold a hand behind their head. In the *Holy Kinship* in Kremsmünster, the borrowings from various works of Leonardo are more evident, but here the pertinent questions should have been where, when, and how did Coxcie become familiar with these works? The answer might have shed more light on Coxcie's 1539 stop in Milan and point to a visit to Florence (where Coxcie might also have seen Masaccio's Eve in the Brancacci chapel). Still, these Leonardo adaptations do not necessarily make Coxcie a better painter from the artistic point of view that Van Mander was talking about. The same is true of learned iconographic details. The inscriptions on the *Last Supper* in Brussels are indeed an ingenious and appropriate commentary on the debate on iconoclasm and the veneration of images, but that they are in Hebrew indicates that Coxcie received help from some scholar — if this person was not the one who, instead of Coxcie, came up with the idea of inserting the inscriptions. The suggestion that *Saint George* in Antwerp is a self-portrait, meant to make anyone who approached the painting with religious intentions “bow, genuflect or kneel before Michiel Coxcie in the guise of St George” (162), raises the question of whether the patron would have allowed such arrogance. Plausible or not, a detail like this one also does not necessarily contribute to the artistic qualities of the painting. (Unfortunately, Jonkheere does not give any source or argument for identifying *Saint George* as Coxcie's self-portrait, while the resemblances between the three presumed “(self-)portraits” on page 25 are not particularly striking.) Ironically, in the last chapter Joris van Grieken describes Coxcie's work, in spite of Jonkheere's efforts, as an “incoherent compilation of quotations” (172).

Thanks to the writers of this book we are now much better informed about Coxcie and his context than Van Mander was, but according to at least some authors, the latter's assessment of Coxcie's work still holds true.

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